

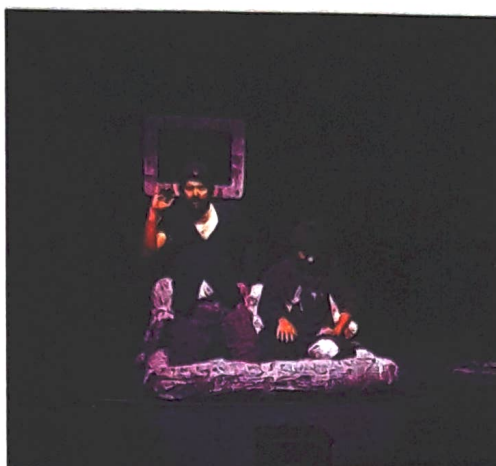
The languages of theatre

THEATRE

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Is the choice of language — in the verbal form — absolutely essential to theatre? How would one address an audience that is pluralistic in character and receptive to different linguistic registers available around it? Contemporary Indian theatre, especially the kind performed in cosmopolitan cities, often grapples with this dilemma. Some of the better works to emerge from this came together in the flexible auditorium of Rangbhoomi Spaces, Hyderabad, when Shudrka Hyderabad Shilpitirtha Trust hosted the fourth edition of *Xpression*.

The Hyderabad-based group, *Sifar*, most interestingly, employed gibberish to get things rolling as it started communicating with the audience entering the performance arena. The production, *Almost Flawless* (picture, top), a two-hander that flirted with various forms, including the indigenous *dastangoi* and the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, featured a Dakkhani-speaking *shayar* and an actor fluent in Hindustani and English; the two complemented each other with infectious energy. Although rooted in real-life incidents, this quasi-absurd performance written and devised by Feroze constantly referred to a search for one Chalib Ghablin — a cross between Charlie Chaplin and Mirza Ghalib. While maintaining a fine balance between reality and absurdity, it excelled in the parallel use of two linguistic registers. The closing sequence where the *shayar* quotes verses by Mirza Ghalib and the actor performs Macbeth's last soliloquy from Shakespeare's eponymous play finds the players involved in a gut-wrenching dialogue. Fleeting passages from *nazms* by Sahir Ludhianvi and Kaifi Azmi ("Woh subah kabhi to aayegi" and



Pic by Suvashis Mullick



"*Waqt ne kiya*") that were made immortal in films shrouded *Almost Flawless* in a melancholia that refused to go hours after it was over.

Among the visiting ensembles, Chandradasan's ambitious twinning of the Cleopatra myth and the Lithuanian myth of Egle in *Agleyum Cliyopatrayum* appeared to be a designer's dream with a serpent painted on the floor and paper streamers lining the stage space. But despite a verbose introduction by the director in English, the performance — in both Malayalam and English — failed to communicate much, but the young actress should not be blamed for the debacle.

Mumbai-based Roopangan pre-

sented Barin Chakraborty's riveting kitchen drama, *Confession Soup*, that Shivaji Sengupta directed. Propelled by Ludhianvi's lyrics, this intensely-structured English drama (with other languages thrown in) is a meditation on the choices we make in a rapidly urbanised India, and the unholy nexus among politicians, corporates and lawyers, making others mere pawns in their hands. Arpita Panja impressed in the pivotal role.

Naihati Rangasena's *The Bloody Red Oleander* attempted a fresh and multilingual interpretation of *Raktakarabi*. Reconstructing the central idea of Tagore's masterpiece with snippets from the poet's oeuvre as a scaffolding seemed novel to start with. English commentaries on the events to unfold also sounded effective. However, the production suffered due to a lack of coherent pattern and kept disintegrating as it progressed.

The hosts, Shudrka, premiered *Kontho, Awaaz, Arupu: Unsilenced* (picture, bottom) directed by Swapan Mondal on the inaugural evening. Structurally, it is a loosely-stitched collage on the freedom of speech and efforts at subordination with episodes from Albert Camus's *Caligula*, Bertolt Brecht's *Life of Galileo*, Utpal Dutt's *Surya Shikar* and Satyajit Ray's *Hirak Rajar Deshe* as illustrations. The play had the words spoken in one language, explained in another, and then the inherent idea carried forward in a third and then in a fourth language. Although Bengali and English form the backbone, Telugu and Hindustani complement these in full measure. Among the actors, the seasoned Souravi Ray and Sohini Basu left a mark, while the youngsters kept the momentum going. With movements down the aisle and the actors carrying symbolic props in their hands, the immersive feel it generated signalled the play's success.